

THE CANADIAN SKILLS IMPERATIVE: BUILDING AND SUSTAINING A CULTURE OF INNOVATION AND ENTREPRENEURIALISM

As a national advocate at the forefront in championing innovation across all sectors of the economy, the Conference Board of Canada hosted the third National Roundtable sponsored by Human Resource Development Canada (HRDC) to examine Canada's current and emerging skills and learning requirements.

The Toronto event, held April 9–10 2001, drew 50 executives from business, government, education, labour and non-governmental organizations. The Roundtable was designed to build common understanding of the issues necessary to build and sustain a culture of innovation and entrepreneurialism, and to produce recommendations for action.

Speakers' Perspectives

Invited speakers addressed these issues from a number of perspectives. The Minister of HRDC provided a broad overview of the links among innovation, entrepreneurialism and lifelong learning, stating that it is people who drive the economy and their skills that lead to innovation. She argued that, given skills shortages already plaguing Canadian firms, there needs to be a highly-inclusive view of innovation and entrepreneurialism. She argued that attention must be paid both to those inside the labour force and those on the outside looking in, including the potential workforce of children and youth, as well as immigrants and other under-represented groups in society. She also called for greater involvement from the private sector in meeting Canada's skills and learning challenges.

The President of Ryerson Polytechnic University called for increased funding to universities to ensure a solid infrastructure for education, both in research and teaching.

The Chair and CEO of SMART Technologies argued that Canada must nurture more medium-sized enterprises that can compete globally.

The President of the Ottawa Center for Research and Innovation (OCRI) promoted collaboration among business, educators and governments as the key to innovation and entrepreneurialism.

An expert from the Ivey School of Business warned that Canada is at grave risk if it does not re-tool to compete against its largest trading partner, the US.

Agenda

Conference participants were divided into two groups to analyze two core questions:

- How do we create the necessary environment in Canada?
- How do we create the necessary capability in Canadian organizations?

Participants defined the necessary skills in the modern as economy as:

- Fundamental skills (literacy and numeracy, communicating, managing information and problem solving);
- Personal management skills (positive attitudes/behaviours, being adaptable and responsible, and learning continuously); and,
- Teamwork skills (participating in projects and tasks with others)

Conference delegates highlighted the necessity of matching individuals' strengths with organizational and societal needs. They stressed the need for an integrated approach to decision making to advance a skills and learning agenda, including federal-provincial collaboration around skills and training. There was recognition that partnerships must extend across all sectors of the economy and society, to bridge the gap between urban and rural, and between the haves and have-nots. Discussions addressed the need for measurable goals and timelines to achieve the desired outcomes. Participants also called for more sharing of best practices and failures, as well as the elimination of barriers that traditionally segregate business, governments and educators.

Discussions among the groups resulted in consensus on common concerns and priorities:

- A need for greater collaboration, partnerships and interconnection
- A need to make lifelong learning a reality
- A need for cultural change (attitudes/values/behaviours)
- A need for concrete action and tangible progress

Possible Actions for Partners

- Create a business case and a collaborative business model for shared purpose and the needed change.
- Communities across Canada should consider developing community-based models (such as OCRI), responsive to their respective situations. Participants could include Boards of Trade, economic development departments, labour groups, governments and educational institutions.
- Act on opportunities for collaborative research. e.g. linking industry, teacher training and professional development.
- Maximize the availability of virtual networks.
- Support universal accessibility of a national broadband network, including financial incentives for "fibre co-ops", to eliminate the digital divide.
- Develop legislative, regulatory and fiscal incentives including tax incentives.

The overarching objective enunciated in the Roundtable report was to engage all Canadians in Canada's skills and learning challenge, recognizing that both individuals and institutions have a vested interest in building societal capacity and fostering a proactive approach to lifelong learning. Participants stressed that various groups in society must work collaboratively to achieve this vision, accepting both individual and collective responsibility. Participants concluded that change comes not just from policy makers, committees and reports, but also from real people taking action within the context of their real "day jobs."